

## Official Historical Memory of the October Revolution in Smolensk

Telling the story of Russia's October 1917 Revolution was an important instrument in the legitimation of Soviet power. As early as the Revolution's first anniversary, a highly politicized process of myth-making had emerged. Central to this process were the recollections of participants in the Revolution, whose stories emphasized the Communist Party's "heroic" leadership of the working class. The importance of memoirs to revolutionary mythology has begun to draw historians' attention. I propose to look into how a "master narrative," or put another way, an "official historical memory" of the October Revolution emerged from memoir literature in one Russian city, Smolensk.

Published memoirs on the 1917 Revolution in Smolensk paint a starkly different picture than that depicted in archival and contemporary press materials. It is clear that soldiers loyal to the Smolensk Soviet battled troops loyal to the municipal council for control over the city on 30-31 October 1917, that the fighting ended in a draw, and that the two sides formed a coalition that ruled Smolensk through December. Yet in memoirs—and as a consequence in Soviet era historical writing—the events of 30-31 October 1917 became transformed. Already by 1921, recollections of Communist functionaries had morphed this indecisive clash into a heroic victory of the proletariat over the forces of counter-revolution, which resulted in the immediate consolidation of Soviet power locally. In 1922 the local Communist Party Historical Commission (*Ispart*) began collecting and disseminating such remembrances. In 1926 *Ispart* drew up a program for the compilation of memoirs in preparation for the Revolution's 10th anniversary which continued through the 1930s. From these efforts emerged a dominant master narrative—a way that the story was supposed to be told—one function of which was to legitimize Soviet rule. This master narrative had such power that even today it structures accounts of local historians who, having rejected Communism, seek to discredit Smolensk's October as the birth of totalitarianism.

This project addresses three issues: the function of memoirs and official historical memory in the legitimation of Soviet power, the importance of local contexts in shaping master narratives, and the malleability of historical memory. Only one other study has addressed the function of revolutionary memoirs in legitimizing Communist rule, Fred Corney's 1997 Columbia University dissertation. But Corney does not investigate the role of official historical memory in asserting Soviet authority in the Russian provinces, where the Party's hold was often quite shaky. Moreover, studies of Soviet historiography have focused almost exclusively on how national politics and official ideology influenced historical writing and have ignored local contexts. Local issues, though, often were critical in shaping the myth history of the October Revolution in the provinces. To understand how the story of Smolensk's October came into being, I am looking at local contests over the legitimacy of memory and personal authority and at gaps in the documentation available to local historians. Finally, this research fits into broader discussions of the nature and malleability of historical memory.

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